A HAWAIIAN PERSPECTIVE ON TARO GROWING

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This Haku poem which I wrote best describes my feeling for taro:

Taro six feet tall
Nodding in the wind
Brings peace to my soul
George Kahumoku,Jr. 1978

Origin of Kalo

Taro has been documented in Chinese history 100 B.C. and in Egyptian history 1000 B.C. According to Hawaiian oral history, as passed on by Kupuna Aunty Edith Kanaka'ole and shared with those like myself, the Hawaiian genesis of mankind began when Wakea, the god of the sky, vibrated with Papa, the earth goddess. The result of this first union was a keiki 'alu alu or flabby-fetus-born-dead. This fetus was buried near the south end of the house where the kalo or taro sprung forth called Haloa-naka or long-stalk-trembling by the Gods. Those of us who are familiar with taro may have noticed long taro stalks trembling with a light wind blowing.

A second union between Wakea and Papa produced man. Henceforth, according to Hawaiian oral tradition, the kalo or taro plant is the eldest brother of man. Like the old time Japanese samurai, who believed that the spiritual energy or "mana" was passed on best by the first-born of the first born of the subsequent generations, the Hawaiians believed that the taro or kalo was spiritually superior to man who was second-born. This belief was so strong that only men (not women, because of their monthly cycles) were allowed to work in the taro patch and do the food preparation, including poi pounding. Post-missionary contact and new belief systems gave women more freedom in relationship to food growing and the preparation and eating of taro.

Today, many of the links between taro and man have survived by the Hawaiian language. The word for family, ohana, comes directly from the word "oha", or young shoots of the taro, and "na", the Hawaiian word denoting plurality, or many young shoots. The huli or "keiki" refer to the children in the family. The taro that is mature and ready to harvest is called makua, the Hawaiian word for parent. The taro that has long been harvested and eaten is called kupuna, the Hawaiian word for grandparent.

One of my favorite reasons for planting taro (besides eating) is for the spiritual link to my ancestral older brother, the kalo. It reminds me of where I came from and where I'm going. Taro also needs the inter-relationship with man in order to survive and do well. This show of affection by man, through land clearing, planting, weeding, fertilizing, and mulching completes the cycle which benefits man at harvest. So, by keeping the taro alive and strong, one keeps mankind and the family healthy and strong.

Dryland Kalo Growing in South Kona

During the 1920's to the 1950's according to my Uncle Willie Kahumoku, kalo was grown by our family mostly for home use. In Honaunau, my Uncle Charlie Mokuohai and Aunty Anna farmed about forty acres of taro for commercial poi use and owned Royal Hawaiian Poi. Anyone with extra taro would sell to Royal Hawaiian Poi. The varieties we grew for poi in Kealia, where I now reside, were mainly Lehua Maoli, Lehua Ula ula, Poni, Pala'i'i, Naioea, O'opu kai, and several varieties of piko taro such as Piko Lehua and Piko Keokeo. The table eating varieties we grew were mostly Mana Ulu, Mana Keokeo and Mana 'Ele 'ele. Mana Opelu, Kumu, and Laoloa varieties and one called "pake taro" (not the Bun Long variety) we grew for pig feed and opelu (mackerel fish) chum, as these had less favorable characteristics. They were too itchy to eat, made poi "hu" (rise and overflow), or were huge and/or with lots of keikis.

We fished and planted by the moon. We found that the three nights before the full moon called Po' Akua, Po' Hoku, and Po' Mahea-lani were best for planting taro. We sometimes planted taro on the Hilo or new moon. Other moon phases were used to plant ulu (breadfruit), ko (sugarcane), mai'a (bananas), and 'uala (sweet potato). Like my ancestors, I still use the o'o or digging stick for planting except my o'o is made of spring steel instead of wood. Taro was planted by softening the earth with the o'o and planted maka lua (two eyes or two huli) in a hole twenty four inches wide in rows four feet apart. It was said that the kalo was lonely and would grow better side by side with a friend. Before planting the land was prepared by

clearing, slashing, and burning. The huli was ho'omakaukau (made ready before hand). All taro was planted at a slanted 45° angle in a ku or hina fashion. The ku style of planting taro slanted 90° perpendicular towards the sun's path across the sky. The hina style of planting taro placed the huli 90° away from the sun's path across the sky. "Ku" was used for making big corms with little or no keikis, "hina" was used for building up huli and making lots of keikis.

During the early 1900's mango, hau, and kukui trees were planted near the stone walled edges of the fields. Along with ama'u ferns, the young leaves of these trees were used to po'i or mulch from six to twelve inches deep around the newly planted taro once that taro had taken and was standing up (about six to eight weeks after planting). It was the job of the youngsters ages twelve to seventeen to climb the trees and break off the young branches. Even today if you go into the South Kona uplands, one can find huge groves of mango, hau, and kukui planted and used for this purpose. Ti and banana were also planted on the edges of the taro and the leaves were also used for fertilizer and mulching. Before the taro began to cover and canopy the entire ground, around three months old, it was weeded one last time and left alone until harvest. No one was allowed to play or make noise near the kalo patch as it was a sacred place.

The taro grew to six, seven, and even eight feet tall. When the leaves would start to shrink and drop, the corms wound begin to form. When the leaves were three to four feet in height or between six to twelve months old, depending on the variety, the taro was harvested. If not harvested in time certain varieties like Lehua would begin to loliloli or rot. You were considered a good taro farmer if four to five makalua (or holes) harvested filled a one hundred ten pound coffee bag. The taro was then taken home where it was steamed in the imu or on an open fire in a fifty-five gallon drum. The taro was then pounded into pa'i'ai with a stone poi pounder by two folks sitting across from each other straddling one long poi board. It was fun to hear the kupunas' poi pounders "talk" to each other while pounding poi.

Pa'i'ai was really stiff pounded taro with little or no water added. The pa'i'ai was placed in thirty gallon kelemania (earthen crocks) for storage. Poi was then made by putting it into smaller bowls of about two gallons each and fermented according to individual taste. My great-grandmother liked her poi three to four weeks old, white and bubbly, as does my older brother who grew up with our great grandparents.

Today we still grow taro much like our kupunas did except we use commercial fertilizer, pig manure, and macadamia nut and coffee husks along with the mango, ti, and banana leaves for mulch.

Thank-you for this opportunity to share.

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